Spinoza’s Middle Standpoint

Draft for the 2020 Western E-Vent in Early Modern Philosophy
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Spinoza appears committed to three claims:

Each mind is necessarily non-eternal.
Each mind can become eternal.
Each mind is eternal.

However, at most one of these claims can be true. If a mind is necessarily non-eternal, it can neither become, nor be, eternal. If it already is eternal, it cannot become eternal. To resolve this difficulty, this essay considers Spinoza’s use of several perspectives, including the perspective of time, the perspective of eternity, and a neglected middle perspective described at E5p31s. But the first half of the essay addresses a prior question: What are eternity and duration for Spinoza?

1. Eternity and Duration

1.1. Eternity Defined

What is eternity? Rejecting two traditional answers—sempiternity and atemporality—Spinoza insists that “eternity can neither be defined by time nor have any relation to time” (E5p23s). Eternity is not a duration, “even if the duration is conceived to be without beginning or end” (E1d8exp). Thus no temporal notions, even the notion of atemporality, appear in Spinoza’s definition of eternity. That definition reads:

By eternity I understand existence itself, insofar as it is conceived to follow necessarily from the definition alone of the eternal thing. (E1d8)

Poiret (1685, 755) noted that ‘the eternal thing’ must be understood as ‘something possessing eternity’, making the definition circular. Some recent interpreters remove the circularity by taking the definition to mean:

For all \( a \), \( a \) is eternal in virtue of the fact that \( a \) is conceived to follow necessarily from the definition of \( a \).

On this reading—endorsed by Bennett (1984, 204), Savan (1994, 5), Waller (2012, 55), Melamed (2016, 156), and Lin (2019, 22) among others—to be eternal is to be self-grounding. However, some modes are eternal (E1p21) though none of them self-ground (E1p33s1). This problem of eternal modes could be solved by retranslating the end of E1d8 as “from the definition alone of an eternal thing.” On this reading, the definition of eternity entails:

For all \( a \) and \( b \), \( a \) is eternal in virtue of the fact that \( a \) is conceived to follow necessarily from the definition of some eternal thing \( b \).
Now the definition is truly circular, and a regress arises. Suppose that something, $a$, is eternal. It is eternal because of two truths:

1. $a$ is conceived to follow necessarily from the definition of something $b$.
2. $b$ is eternal.

(2) is true because of two truths:

3. $b$ is conceived to follow necessarily from the definition of something $c$.
4. $c$ is eternal.

Obviously, this regress could continue forever. However, it could also end as follows. Consider this fact:

$GE$: God is eternal.

$GE$ obtains in virtue of two truths:

$GF$: God is conceived to follow necessarily from the definition of God.
$GE$: God is eternal.

The series that begins with (1)–(4) could end in a loop: $GE$ is grounded in $GF$ (which is true by the definition of God) and $GE$, which is grounded in $GF$ and $GE$, and so on. This reading may seem perplexing, as it makes $GE$ self-grounding. That is, it makes God eternal for circular reasons. However, one could say that this reflects God’s self-causality. After all, God’s existence is eternity. And God exists for circular reasons. Therefore, God is eternal for circular reasons.

On this reading—which Melamed (2016, 156) hints at—the circularity of E1d8 derives from the fact that God is self-causing. The circularity of E1d8 and God’s self-causation may puzzle us, but we should not be puzzled twice. They are the same puzzling circularity in two guises. Once God’s eternity is granted, a mode can count as eternal in virtue of the fact that it (mediately or immediately) follows from God’s definition. That’s one way to solve the problem of eternal modes.

1.2. Eternity as an Aspect

Eternity is “existence itself insofar as it is conceived to follow necessarily from the definition alone of an eternal thing.” In the background is Spinoza’s theory of aspects (see Klein, 2014; Douglas, 2018; and Melamed, 2018, 102). An aspect is something denoted by an ‘insofar-as’ phrase, e.g. ‘God insofar as he is thinking’. Call aspects of the same thing ‘co-aspects’. Co-aspects have what Rea (1998) calls “sameness without identity”. That is, they differ while also being one and the same thing, without contradiction (Klein, ibid., 182). Consider the lump-statue puzzle: If a lump of clay is molded into a statue, intuitively the lump and the statue are one and the same thing. Yet they clearly differ: unlike the statue, the lump can survive being squashed. One solution: call the lump and statue co-aspects. The clay qua lump has a property that the clay qua statue lacks (Rea, 1998).

It is helpful to draw an analogy with time. Suppose that on Sunday, a certain lamp is off, but on Monday the lamp is on. Of course we cannot attribute to the lamp both of the properties is off and is on. We could say that the lamp on Sunday is off and the lamp on Monday is on. An object like the lamp on
Sunday is a timeslice or temporal part. There is a clear sense in which the lamp on Sunday and the lamp on Monday are one and the same thing. And yet they differ. So too with co-aspects.

One could say that the property is on does not belong to the lamp simpliciter but to a temporal part (the lamp on Monday). One could say that the property can survive being squashed does not belong to the clay simpliciter but to an aspect (the clay qua lump). Analogously, Spinoza says that the property is eternal does not belong to anything simpliciter but instead to an aspect.

Each mode x also has another aspect: x qua singular. Singular things are “finite and have a determinate existence” (E2d7). Mode x qua eternal and x qua singular are one and the same thing, but they differ: only x qua eternal fully depends on God. Mode x qua singular cannot fully depend on God, as what fully depends on something eternal must itself be eternal (E5p33d; see Primus, 2019, 12). Thus x qua singular depends partly on another singular thing, which depends partly on another, to infinity (E1p28). Your singular and eternal selves are co-aspects. So too with your mind and your body. They are “one and the same thing” (E2p7s), though they differ in various ways. For example, your mind represents your body, but your body does not represent anything. Two aspecral distinctions (extended/mental and singular/eternal) cross-cut, yielding at least four aspects for each mode x x qua singular body, x qua singular mind, x qua eternal body, and x qua eternal mind.

For Spinoza, the phrase ‘God insofar as he is a thinking thing’ (E2p7s) is equivalent to ‘God insofar as he is considered as a thinking thing’ (E2p5). This is because an aspect is something as conceived in a certain way. We could also put this in terms of perspectives. To say that

\[ x, \text{ in one aspect, is } F \]

is to say that

\[ x, \text{ insofar as it is conceived in a certain way, is } F \]

or equivalently that

\[ \text{from a certain perspective, } x \text{ is } F. \]

To conceive the eternal aspect of a mode is to conceive that mode sub specie aeternitatis (E5p29s). This phrase can be translated ‘under the aspect of eternity’ or, what comes to the same thing, ‘from the perspective of eternity’.

We now turn to a closely related notion.

1.3. Duration

In a valuable section of the Metaphysical Thoughts, Spinoza explains that
duration is an attribute under which we conceive the existence of created things insofar as they persevere in their actuality. [Like eternity, duration is an aspect of existence] … But to determine this duration, we compare it with the duration of other things which have a certain and determinate motion. [To conceive something as enduring at a specific time, or for a specific period of time, is to conceive it through external relations. For example, we conceive an event as occurring at noon by relating it to the Sun (E2p44s).] This comparison is called a time. A time [tempus], therefore, is not an affection of things, but only…a being of reason. (CM i.4; 1/244; translation modified)
To conceive something as enduring is to conceive it as persevering (E1p24c)—persevering simpliciter, that is, not persevering for any specific length of time. Spinoza holds that one can conceive of something simply as enduring—i.e. as continuing to exist—without conceiving it as existing at any particular time. This is to conceive of something as having “an indefinite continuation of existing” (Spinoza’s definition of duration, E2d5). Analogously, a line, considered as an abstract geometrical figure, could be conceived as having extension, though it is not conceived as occupying any particular points in space.

We can also conceive something as having a determinate duration. This involves thinking of it extrinsically, i.e., not as it is in itself but “as it has a relation to something else” (Ep8; IV/40). Consider the property lasts for 24 hours. It consists in an extrinsic relation, lasts as long as the Earth takes to spin. The relation consists in a mental act, a comparison. Thus a definite duration such as a day is nothing more than a comparison, a mental being. This mental being is a “being of reason” when it is imagined as existing outside the mind (cf. E2p17s). For the passage concerns particular durations, comparisons, relations, and times, not duration or time in general, so I translate tempus as ‘a time’, not ‘Time’ per Curley. Ep12 identifies a ‘time’ with a ‘determinate duration’ (1/58). I think this is generally how Spinoza uses the term. (An exception: ‘an indefinite time’ at E3p8 is glossed as ‘an indefinite duration’ at E3p9d.) Since a conception of something as temporally finite involves conceiving it extrinsically, this conception is not adequate. For an adequate idea or definition of something must not mention its extrinsic relations, i.e., its “extrinsic denominations” (TIE §101; I/36). (See Gartenberg, forthcoming.) Consequently, contrastive explanations, which mention what something lacks or is opposite to, usually occur in the Ethics not in definitions but appended explications, e.g., E1d6exp (see Hübner, 2015) and many explications in Parts 2 and 3, including the explication of duration. Thus no adequate ideas represent anything as having a definite duration. Reason, therefore, conceives things only as eternal (E2p44c2). Whether time is an illusion depends on the nature of the perspective of eternity, which we will address in section 2. Now that we have defined eternity and duration, let’s consider the relationship between them.

1.4. Sempiternity?

Eternity is not identical with sempiternity (indefinite duration). For to conceive something as eternal involves conceiving it “without any relation to time” (E2p44c2d) and “eternity can neither be defined by time nor have any relation to time” (E5p23s). In the Metaphysical Thoughts, Spinoza holds that eternity is incompatible with sempiternity, writing that “since God’s being is eternal, i.e., in it there can be nothing which is before or after, we can never ascribe duration to him” (CM ii.1; I/250–51). However, in the Ethics, Spinoza sometimes assigns eternal things temporal predicates, for example:

Remains: The mind’s eternal part “remains [remanet]” after the body dies (E5p23).

Always had to exist: Certain modes cannot have “a determinate existence, or duration” (E1p21d), and therefore “have always [semper] had to exist...or [sive, indicating equivalence] are...eternal” (E1p21).
The most plausible approach to these predicates is, I think, as follows. Despite initial appearances, though eternity is not defined in terms of sempiternity, eternity is still compatible with sempiternity. Indeed, for the Spinoza of the *Ethics*, sempiternity entails eternity. Spinoza denied this view in the 1663 *Metaphysical Thoughts*, but changed his mind by 1666. In a letter of that year, Spinoza argues that a necessarily existing being is eternal,

for if a limited duration were attributed to it, that being would be conceived as not existing beyond that limited duration, or as not involving necessary existence, which would be contrary to its definition. (Ep35; IV/181)

Here Spinoza reasons from ‘if necessary, then not temporally finite’ to ‘if necessary, then eternal’. He tacitly assumes ‘if not temporally finite, then eternal’. But of course he thinks ‘if sempiternal, then not temporally finite’. So he must think ‘if sempiternal, then eternal’. He makes the same assumption at E1p21d, where he argues that certain modes must be eternal, since they cannot have a finite duration.

Objection: ‘Entailment is a relation. So, if eternity entailed sempiternity, eternity would have a relation to time. Yet Spinoza remarks that eternity has no relation to time (E5p23s).’ My reply draws on Bennett (1984, 205). The remark that eternity has no relation to time does not favor any one interpretation over another. It is also incompatible with the claims that ‘eternity does not entail sempiternity’ or ‘eternity entails atemporality’, since these also posit relations between eternity and time. It is unlikely that Spinoza means to exclude negative relations by the term ‘relation’. For him the focal meaning of ‘relation’ is ‘extrinsic relation’, and a typical example is a negative relation.

Objection: ‘Spinoza says that “in eternity, there is neither when, nor before, nor after” (E1p33s2). Thus eternal things do not exist in time.’ I reply that we can explain this claim in a different way. Temporal properties such as *lasts a day*, *starts at noon*, *starts before noon*, *starts after noon*, *starts before sunrise*, and *starts after sunset* are grounded in mental acts of comparison and relation. Conceived eternally, i.e. through its intrinsic relations, a mode has no such properties. In this sense, in eternity there is no when (there are no determinate times), nor before, nor after (no mind-independent temporal relations).

Spinoza assigns yet another temporal predicate to an eternal thing: *loves*. Only changeable, temporal things can love, as love involves an increase in perfection (E3p13s). However, though God is immutable, he “loves” humanity (E5p36c). This may at first seem flatly inconsistent. I believe that unlike *always had to exist* (which is meant literally), *loves* here is meant metaphorically. Spinoza clarifies: “literally speaking [*proprie loquendo*], God loves no one” (E5p17c, my translation). (The Latin *proprie* can mean ‘literally’, as Ashworth, 2007, 311–12 *et passim*, explains.) At CM ii.8 (1/264), Spinoza compares ‘God loves’ to ‘the land disgorges men’ (Leviticus 18). The verbs are metaphors that anthropomorphize Nature.

Spinoza is using a special method of communication: the method of describing an eternal thing as if it were temporal, for didactic reasons, since readers find it easier to think about temporal things. I’ll call this method *temporal synkatabasis*. Generally, synkatabasis is the method of coming down to the audience’s level (Dreyfus, 1983). Spinoza’s policy is “to speak according to the power of understanding of ordinary people” (TIE §17; 1/9). Spinoza says that the Biblical God similarly “accommodated his revelations to the power of understanding…of the Prophets” (TTP ii; III/42). That God caters to his audience is a traditional view. The Talmud says: “The Torah speaks in the language of men.” Gregory the Great explains that the Bible “speaks to us as beings brought forth in
time” and often “relat[es] something which belongs to eternity after the manner of time” (quoted and translated in Evans, 1991, 120).

The representation of the eternal as temporal is a theme in Platonist mathematics. Plato’s *Timaeus* was sometimes read as representing the ungenerated, eternal cosmos as if it were created in time (see Baltes et al., v.84–180). Some Platonists liken this method of representation to that involved in a geometrical construction, which visually represents an eternal shape as springing to life on the page. Some Platonists say that philosophers may imitate geometers in using the method of “ facilitating understanding, for didactic reasons, by exhibiting [something eternal] as in the course of formation” (Aristotle, *De Caelo*, 279b). Proclus reports a Platonist theory: constructions represent “eternal things as if they were in the process of coming to be” (1992, 64). Echoing these words, Spinoza invokes this method of representation at E5p31s: “for an easier explanation and better understanding…we will consider [the eternal mind] as if it were now beginning to be.” He is, as it were, constructing the mind.

Whether from Biblical interpretation or from theories of mathematics rooted in Platonism, Spinoza seems to have learned of the method of describing eternal things as if they were temporal, for didactic reasons. Those who wish to read ‘remains’ in an atemporal sense (e.g. Harris, 1971, 673) could improve their case by classifying such terms as metaphors, and specifically as examples of temporal synkatabasis. Primus (2019, 17) takes the similar approach of interpreting Spinoza as accommodating the perspective of a temporal being, remarking that, though an infinite mode does not in fact endure, “[f]rom the perspective of someone reasoning in time, [it] always exists.”

### 1.5. Eternity and Duration as Actualities

Spinoza develops his theory of duration and eternity at E2p8s. There he examines Euclid’s method of constructing two equal-area rectangles from a circle. Spinoza holds that before the construction is carried out, the rectangles are “contained in”—they exist potentially in—the circle (Primus, 2017, 175). Once constructed, they exist in a new way. Spinoza says that these ways rectangles can exist—as constructed and as contained—illustrate two kinds of existence that singular things can have: durational existence (“the existence through which they are said to have duration”) and eternal existence (their existence “insofar as they are comprehended in God’s attributes”). Spinoza glosses ‘exists durationally’ as ‘exists actually [actu]” (E2p9d). However, to exist eternally is another way of existing actually, as Spinoza explains:

We conceive things as actual [actuales] in two ways, either insofar as we conceive them to exist in relation to a certain time and place, or insofar as we conceive them to be contained in God…. But the things we conceive in this second way as true, or real, we conceive under the aspect of eternity…. (E5p29s)

How can we think of eternity as a kind of actuality?

A clue: many of the ideas just mentioned appear in book 9 of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*. Aristotle says: “we say that potentially…the half-line is in the whole, because it might be separated out…” (1048a; Aristotle, 1984, ii.1655). The half-line is in (=exists potentially in) the whole line. Bisection, like any method of geometrical construction, actualizes a shape that exists potentially (1051a29–a33; Aristotle, 1984, ii.1660). In the *De Anima*, Aristotle famously says that “there are two kinds of actuality corresponding to knowledge and to reflecting” (412a; Aristotle, 1984, i.656). Aristotle clarifies that by...
‘knowledge’ he means ‘knowledge possessed but not employed’. Thus, on a natural reading, Aristotle holds that before construction, the half-line has the first kind of actuality (=potentiality, typified by knowledge possessed but not employed). After construction, it has the second kind of actuality (typified by knowledge put to use). Aristotle (so interpreted) agrees with Spinoza that a shape, before construction, has one kind of actuality, and has two kinds once constructed.

This suggests the following interpretation. Spinoza’s distinction between actualities draws, to some extent, on Aristotle’s distinction between first and second actualities. According to Spinoza, for a body to be eternal—contained in God—is for it to exist as a first actuality in extension, i.e. to exist potentially in extension. *Mutatis mutandis* for a mind, which exists potentially in thought (characterized as a capacity of thought). This accords with Garrett (2009, 287)’s view that the essence of a finite mode is the “at-least-sometimes-unactualized possibility” of its existence. Spinoza avoids the term ‘potentiality’, I think, in order to stress that an essence is not merely something that could exist. It does exist. He insists that, even when it is unactualized, it is “nevertheless something” (E5p23d) and is a “real being” (E5p30d).

Now that we have explored the themes of duration and eternity, we turn to a difficult problem.

2. *Is the Mind Non-Eternal, Becoming Eternal, or Eternal?*

2.1. *Three Claims*

As mentioned at the outset, Spinoza appears committed to holding that the mind is (1) necessarily non-eternal, (2) capable of becoming eternal, and (3) simply eternal. But this triad is grossly inconsistent. If the mind is necessarily non-eternal, it cannot be or become eternal. If the mind is eternal, it cannot become eternal, as it cannot change. Where does Spinoza appear to make these claims?

The only eternal things are substances and infinite modes. However, the mind is not a substance (E2p10). Nor is it infinite. For at E4p4d Spinoza rejects a certain hypothesis since it entails “that [a man] would be infinite. But this…is absurd.” So the mind is non-eternal. We “live in continuous change” (E5p39s) and are “necessarily always subject to passions” (E4p4c). The mind is confused when passively determined, clear when self-determined (E2p28); but it cannot be wholly self-determined (E4p4), so error is inevitable. Thus Spinoza seems committed to

\[a\] Necessarily, the mind is finitely temporal (=non-eternal), passionate, and fallible.

Yet he also says: “An affect which is a passion ceases to be a passion as we form a clear and distinct idea of it” (E5p3, my translation). Since “[t]here is no affect of which we cannot form some clear and distinct concept” (E5p4c), all passions can be remedied. Indeed, all our inadequate ideas can be made adequate. For “the mind can bring it about that all the body’s affections, or images of things, are related to the idea of God,” i.e., conceived as contained in God (E5p14). The mind thereby makes itself more eternal (E5p39d). Since every passion and inadequate idea can be fixed, the mind can become totally eternal. Spinoza appears committed to

\[b\] The mind can become eternal, remediying all its passions, fixing all its errors.
Thus Spinoza seems to believe, as he did in his youth, that the mind can “make itself eternal” (I/52). Bennett (1984, 363) objects that one cannot become eternal as, for Spinoza, “the facts which determine how much of my mind is eternal are themselves eternal truths.”

Indeed, by Spinoza’s lights, eternalization seems utterly impossible. The mind cannot become eternal for, seen rightly, it already is eternal. After all, adequate ideas represent things as eternal (E2p44c2). Spinoza also holds (1) that all ideas are in God (E1p15) and (2) that “all ideas which are in God…are all true” (E2p32d). Thus no false ideas, no errors, can exist. Passions are false ideas (E3d4). Thus, what appears to be a passion is not a passion when conceived truly, i.e., through its causes: “insofar as we understand the causes of sadness…to that extent it ceases to be sadness” (E5p18s). Seen truly, the mind is passionless. Hence Spinoza seems committed to

\[ e \] Every mind (indeed every idea) is necessarily eternal, free of passion and error.

Logically only one of \( t \), \( b \), and \( e \) can be true. Yet Spinoza appears committed to each. Can we avoid attributing to him a flagrant inconsistency?

2.2. Three Perspectives

We can. Spinoza holds that \( t \), \( b \), and \( e \) are true for different perspectives. Spinoza holds that there are several perspectives we can take on things. For ease of exposition I will notate them with symbols.

1. We can conceive things “under the aspect of eternity [\textit{sub specie aeternitatis}]” (E2p44c2, E5p29s). That is, we can conceive things from the Perspective of Eternity, hereafter \( \mathbb{E} \).
2. We can conceive things “in relation to a certain time and place” (E5p29s). That is, we can use the Perspective of Time, hereafter \( \mathbb{T} \). (Here I am using ‘time’ to mean ‘definite duration’, following Ep12.)
3. We can conceive things “under duration” (E5p23s)—i.e. as enduring, though not as enduring at any particular time. Call this the Perspective of Duration, hereafter \( \mathbb{D} \).

When we conceive something as eternal (through \( \mathbb{E} \)), we abstract away from its relationship with time and conceive it just in terms of its relation to God. But when we conceive something as enduring (through \( \mathbb{D} \)), we conceive it as continuing to exist in time. Thus \( \mathbb{D} \) conceives things in relation to time in general. When we conceive something in relation to a specific time, we conceive it through \( \mathbb{T} \).

A neglected perspective is introduced at E5p31s. There Spinoza asks us to consider the mind as if it were shifting perspectives:

[W]e shall continue, as we have done hitherto, to consider [the eternal mind] as if it…were now beginning to understand things under the aspect of eternity. (My translation)

We shall consider the mind as beginning to understand things as eternal. From the standpoint of a mind making this shift, things appear to become eternal. Let’s call this shifting standpoint the Perspective of Becoming Eternal, hereafter \( \mathbb{B} \). One claim Spinoza makes while using \( \mathbb{B} \) is that God loves humanity (E5p36c). Love involves an increase in perfection. Thus \( \mathbb{B} \) construes things as passing out of a state
of imperfection and finitude. \( \mathfrak{B} \), then, is the perspective of someone shifting from \( \mathfrak{T} \) to \( \mathfrak{E} \). For \( \mathfrak{T} \) is the only perspective that construes things as finite.

What role do these perspectives play in the *Ethics*?

### 2.3. Perspective-Relativity

A clue can be found at E5p37s, which states that “the axiom of Part 4” — viz., that singular things can be destroyed — “concerns singular things insofar as they are considered in relation to a certain time and place.” The axiom describes how things appear to \( \mathfrak{T} \) (the Perspective of Time, from which all things appear non-eternal). The axiom is *implicitly perspective-relative*, just as “The motorbike is going at 100 mph” is implicitly relative to a physical reference frame. The axiom first appeared to commit Spinoza to a certain proposition \( p \). In fact, the axiom commits Spinoza to a perspectival claim. We could express this claim as ‘\( p \) is true for \( \mathfrak{T} \)’, or ‘\( p\mathfrak{T} \)’ for short.

E4p4 and E4p4c seemed to commit Spinoza to \( t \): Necessarily, the mind is finitely temporal (=non-eternal), passionate, and fallible.

Yet these passages are probably relative to \( \mathfrak{T} \), like the axiom of Part 4, since they rest on that axiom. Now consider Spinoza’s apparent commitment to \( b \):

- The mind can become eternal, remedying all its passions, fixing all its errors.

This commitment stems from E5p3: “An affect which is a passion ceases to be a passion as we form [simulatque...formam] a clear and distinct idea of it.” Yet the passions only exist from a certain perspective, as Spinoza explains:

the passions are not related to the mind except insofar as it has something which involves a negation, or insofar as it is considered as a part of nature which cannot be perceived clearly and distinctly through itself, without the others. (E3p3s, compare E4p2)

The predicate *is a passion* is like *is blurry*. As we focus a camera, the blurry things stop being blurry. Analogously, as we form clear ideas of the passions, they stop being passions. Thus E5p3 describes how things appear from \( \mathfrak{B} \). Deleuze (1992, 308) rightly views the transition from inadequate to adequate ideas as an “appearance”, which he rightly identifies with the appearance mentioned at E5p33s:

The mind has had eternally the same perfections which, in our fiction \([\mathfrak{B}]\), now come to it.

A provisional solution to the problem, then: the passages that initially appeared to commit Spinoza to \( t \) and \( b \) instead commit him to \( \mathfrak{T} \) and \( \mathfrak{B} \). This is my notation for ‘\( t \) is true for \( \mathfrak{T} \)’ and ‘\( b \) is true for \( \mathfrak{B} \)’. When we consider the perspectives more closely, however, an additional nuance emerges.

### 2.4. The Time-Eternity Barrier and the Solipsism of \( \mathfrak{B} \)

Each perspective is a set of ideas. An adequate idea represents things as eternal (E2p44c2). Insofar as a mind represents things as eternal, it *is* eternal: “the mind is eternal, insofar as it conceives things
under the aspect of eternity” (E5p31s). Thus an idea is adequate iff it is eternal. \(\mathbb{E}\) comprises all and only the adequate ideas—it is God’s intellect. So \(\mathbb{E}\) is eternal. Thus \(\mathbb{E}\) represents itself, among other things. But \(\mathbb{E}\) represents no non-eternal (singular) things.

\(\mathbb{T}\) comprises only inadequate ideas. Since an idea is adequate iff it is eternal, inadequate ideas are non-eternal, i.e. singular. Thus all of \(\mathbb{T}\)'s parts are singular, and so \(\mathbb{T}\) is singular.\(^1\) Thus \(\mathbb{T}\) represents itself, among other things. To conceive something via \(\mathbb{T}\) is not to conceive it with one’s intellect, but to imagine it. \(\mathbb{T}\) represents no eternal things, as Spinoza emphasizes:

Insofar as the mind...conceives duration, which can be determined by time...to that extent it has only the power of conceiving things in relation to time. ... But eternity cannot be explained by duration (by E1d8 and E1d8exp). Therefore, to that extent the mind does not have the power of conceiving things under the aspect of eternity. (E5p29d)

Since \(\mathbb{E}\) is an eternal set of ideas, \(\mathbb{T}\) cannot conceive \(\mathbb{E}\). It therefore cannot represent any propositions with form ‘\(p\mathbb{E}\)’. Conversely, \(\mathbb{E}\) cannot conceive \(\mathbb{T}\) or any propositions with form ‘\(p\mathbb{T}\)’. \(\mathbb{T}\) and \(\mathbb{E}\) cannot see each another. Spinoza institutes what we might call

*the Time-Eternity Barrier*. \(\mathbb{T}\), which is singular, represents nothing eternal. \(\mathbb{E}\), which is eternal, represents nothing singular. Therefore, no truths with form ‘\(p\mathbb{T}\)’ are true for \(\mathbb{E}\). That is, no truths have the form ‘\(p\mathbb{TE}\)’. And conversely no truths with form ‘\(p\mathbb{E}\)’ are true for \(\mathbb{T}\). That is, no truths have the form ‘\(p\mathbb{ET}\)’.\(^2\)

What is \(\mathbb{B}\)’s ontology? Each idea in \(\mathbb{B}\) represents something as shifting from \(\mathbb{T}\) to \(\mathbb{E}\). At the start of this process, \(\mathbb{B}\) represents all things as singular, so it then comprises inadequate singular ideas. At the end of the process, \(\mathbb{B}\) represents all things as eternal, so it comprises adequate eternal ideas. So \(\mathbb{B}\) is itself becoming eternal. \(\mathbb{T}\) represents all things as necessarily temporally finite, and \(\mathbb{E}\) represents all things as necessarily eternal, so an eternalizing entity such as \(\mathbb{B}\) cannot be conceived through \(\mathbb{T}\) and \(\mathbb{E}\). \(\mathbb{B}\) can only be represented by itself. Let’s call this

*the Solipsism of \(\mathbb{B}\)*: No truths have the form ‘\(p\mathbb{BT}\)’ or ‘\(p\mathbb{BE}\)’.

E5p31s states that we have used \(\mathbb{B}\) “hitherto” (*hoc usque*). While I doubt Spinoza means we’ve been using it since page one, this suggests that a significant portion of the *Ethics* is implicitly \(\mathbb{B}\)-relative.

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1 A whole can be fully explained in terms of its parts (CM ii.5|1/258). But \(\mathbb{T}\)’s parts cannot be fully explained through God. So \(\mathbb{T}\) cannot be fully explained through God. Therefore \(\mathbb{T}\) is non-eternal i.e. singular.

2 Spinoza appears to break the Barrier at E2p42d, where he says that we “know the true and the false by the second or third kind of knowledge.” I don’t think this one proposition (never used) outweighs the evidence that he posits the Barrier. I admit, though, that judgments of evidential weight are subjective. Analogously, Spinoza clearly posits an inter-attribute conceptual barrier (E2p5), though he sometimes reasons across attributes, e.g., at E3p14d (“if the body, and consequently the mind…”). He does say that we “sense and experience that we are eternal” (E5p23s, my translation). However, this is a metaphor, based on the idea that demonstrations are “the eyes of the mind”. If he had thought of demonstrations as the nostrils of the mind, he would have said that we can smell that we are eternal. Like *loves* this metaphor is an application of the method of temporal synkatabasis.
We can now see that $\mathbb{T}$, $\mathbb{B}$, and $e$ are inconsistent. For suppose $e$ is true simpliciter. Then all ideas are eternal. And so then neither $\mathbb{T}$ nor $\mathbb{B}$ exist (since they comprise non-eternal ideas). To remedy this problem, we could interpret Spinoza as holding $\mathbb{T}$, $\mathbb{B}$, and $\mathbb{E}$. However, this solution is incomplete. To see why, and to complete the solution, we must think about objectivity.

2.5. Objectivity and Ouroboral Perspectives

Suppose $\mathbb{E}$ captures the whole objective truth. That is, suppose Spinoza holds:

For all propositions $p$, $p$ is true iff $p\mathbb{E}$.

Then he cannot hold

(1) $\mathbb{T}$ is true.

For (1) entails $\mathbb{T}\mathbb{E}$ (i.e. ‘$t$ is true for $\mathbb{T}$’ is true for $\mathbb{E}$). But $\mathbb{T}\mathbb{E}$ breaks the Time-Eternity Barrier. Nor can he hold ‘$t$ is true for $\mathbb{T}$’. For that means

(2) $\mathbb{T}\mathbb{T}$ is true.

(2) entails $\mathbb{T}\mathbb{T}\mathbb{E}$, again breaking the Barrier. Nor can he hold ‘$\mathbb{T}\mathbb{T}$ is true for $\mathbb{T}$’. For that means

(3) $\mathbb{T}\mathbb{T}\mathbb{T}$ is true.

This series continues ad infinitum. Spinoza cannot hold any claim expressed by ‘$t$’ followed by finitely many $\mathbb{T}$ symbols, for any such claim breaks the Barrier. But now suppose we multiply these $\mathbb{T}$ symbols endlessly. That is, suppose Spinoza holds

$\mathbb{T}^*$ Let ‘$*$’ mean ‘repeat the preceding symbol endlessly’.

In other words, suppose he thinks that the singular mind is something that we imagine that we imagine that we imagine, etc., *ad infinitum* (and *ad nauseam*). This claim is not too contemporary for Spinoza to entertain, as he infinitely iterates ‘knows’:

For as soon as someone knows something, he thereby knows that he knows it, and at the same time knows that he knows that he knows, and so on, to infinity [*scit se scire quod scit et sic in infinitum*]. (E2p21s)

Does $\mathbb{T}^*$ entail $\mathbb{T}^*\mathbb{E}$, breaking the Barrier? Here’s a short argument that it does not. Consider this incomplete proposition:

(1’) $\mathbb{T}$ is true for…

This could be partially completed as follows: ‘$\mathbb{T}$ is true for $T$, or least that is true for…’ That is equivalent to:

(2’) $\mathbb{T}\mathbb{T}$ is true for…

This could be partially completed as follows: ‘$\mathbb{T}\mathbb{T}$ is true for $T$, or least that is true for…’ That is equivalent to:
(3’) \(\mathcal{T}\mathcal{T}\mathcal{T}\) is true for…

And so on. (1’) is further completed by (2’), which is further completed by (3’), etc. Since these are incomplete propositions, they have no entailments and so don’t entail any proposition with form ‘\(p\mathcal{E}\)’. Thus the Time-Eternity Barrier is never broken as this series continues. The limit of the series is \(\mathcal{T}\mathcal{T}\mathcal{T}\). So \(\mathcal{T}\mathcal{T}\mathcal{T}\) doesn’t break the Barrier.

By analogous reasoning, Spinoza may posit \(\mathcal{B}\mathcal{B}\), without thereby entailing \(\mathcal{B}\mathcal{B}\mathcal{E}\) (which would violate the Solipsism of \(\mathcal{B}\)). Thus, if \(\mathcal{E}\) captures the whole objective truth, we can take Spinoza to hold four consistent claims:

\[\mathcal{T}\mathcal{T}\mathcal{T}, \mathcal{B}\mathcal{B}\mathcal{T}, \mathcal{E}, \text{and } e.\]

Let me restate this without symbols. The mind is eternal. However, it is temporally finite, passionate, and fallible, or at least that is true for the Perspective of Time, or at least that is true for that same perspective, and so on, endlessly. And the mind can become eternal (free of passion and error), or at least that is true for the Perspective of Becoming Eternal, or at least that is true for that same perspective, and so on, endlessly. On this view, \(\mathcal{T}\) and \(\mathcal{B}\) are self-embedded, ouroboral perspectives.

Does Spinoza think \(\mathcal{E}\) is the objective truth? I suspect many think so. For example, Douglas (2018, 277) says: “It is clear enough that ‘God quaternus infinite is P’ [i.e. God from the perspective of eternity is P] implies ‘God is P.’” Yet the evidence is mixed. Spinoza says:

if we attend to [quantity] as it is in the intellect, and perceive the thing as it is in itself…then we find it to be infinite…. (Ep12; IV/56).

\(\mathcal{E}\) is God’s intellect. So \(\mathcal{E}\) perceives quantity as it is in itself. This may mean ‘objectively’. But it may instead mean ‘intrinsically’. \(\mathcal{E}\) and \(\mathcal{T}\) are the two ways of considering mentioned in Ep8: “a thing can be considered in two ways, either as it is in itself [=intrinsically=via \(\mathcal{E}\)] or as it has a relation to something else [=extrinsically=via \(\mathcal{T}\)]” (IV/40). E1p10s states that “each being must be conceived under some attribute....” That is, we conceive only aspects: we conceive things only from various perspectives. Further, Spinoza posits a correlation: the more something exists, the more it has attributes/aspects: “something has attributes because it is something. So the more it is something, the more attributes it must have” (KV i.2; I/19). Conversely, “the more attributes I attribute to a being the more I am compelled to attribute existence to it; that is, the more I conceive it as true” (Ep8; IV/45). This correlation isn’t just a contingent pattern; it rests on a metaphysical connection. To modify Della Rocca (2012, 11)’s view that to exist is to be conceived, I hold that, for Spinoza, to exist is to have aspects. To exist, in other words, is to be conceived from a perspective.

Spinoza may therefore embrace a notorious doctrine, Perspective Relativism. We might initially formulate PR as

\[r: \text{All truths have the form ‘}q\mathcal{P}\text{’ (where }\mathcal{P}\text{ is a perspective).}\]
To avoid self-refutation, defenders of Perspective Relativism must not formulate it as \( r \) but as \( P_1 P_2 P_3 \) etc. endlessly, where the ‘P’ variables are (possibly identical) perspectives. If Spinoza holds this view, he must not endorse \( e \) but instead \( E^* \). On this reading, Spinoza endorses a consistent triad:

\[
\mathcal{T}^*, \mathcal{B}^*, \text{and } E^*.
\]

If so, \( E \) is not truth simpliciter but just “another standard of truth” (\( \textit{alia norma veritatis} \), E1app; II/79; see Sharp, 2011, 22).

Let’s take stock. In the first half of this essay, I discussed Spinoza’s theories of eternity and duration. I explained the circularity of the definition of eternity and explained how Spinoza may legitimately ascribe temporal predicates to eternal things. In the second half, I discussed passages that apparently commit Spinoza to an inconsistent triad: (\( t \)) the mind is necessarily temporally finite, passionate and fallible, (\( b \)) the mind can become eternal, free of passion and error, and (\( e \)) the mind is eternal, already free of passion and error. I canvassed two ways of rescuing Spinoza from inconsistency. The first is to regard the perspective of eternity as objectively correct and to relativize \( t \) and \( b \) to different (infinitely iterated) perspectives. The second solution is to relativize \( t \), \( b \), and \( e \) to different (infinitely iterated) perspectives. On either reading, Spinoza can consistently hold that, depending on how you look at the mind, it is simultaneously non-eternal, becoming eternal, and eternal.

Of course ‘simultaneously’ is the wrong word. But who can avoid wrong words when discussing eternity? As Borges (1944) noted, “our language is…saturated and animated by time.”

Bibliography


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